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Green, Sturdy Crew on Senator's Express

By Charles Nicodemus
Of Our Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON—The Chuck Percy express is highballing across the political landscape, destination unknown, with a young, green crew at the controls stoking the fires higher and hanging on for dear life.

That crew is freshman Sen. Charles Percy's fledgling staff.

The Percy special has negotiated several sharp curves in the Illinois Republican's first four breakneck months in office without rocketing off the track, as some predicted he would. This can be credited at least in part to the performance of that crew.

SHORT ON experience, long on brains and mostly a steadying influence on their peripatetic boss, the top Percy staffers include an ex-bank vice president, a former CIA agent, a former newsmagazine writer and a railroad attorney.

Also—in a neat bit of irony—a former aide-de-camp to Gen. William Westmoreland, who doubtless is not enamoured with Percy's dovelike ways.

There's mounting speculation that Percy may be persuaded to switch off the senatorial route at convention junction and head down the main line toward the White House in '68.

And recollections here are still fresh with names like Pierre Salinger, Theodore Sorensen, Lawrence O'Brien and Kenneth O'Donnell, who wound up running the White House when their boss, Sen. John F. Kennedy, moved up from the Senate.

As did another crop of Senate staff graduates—Bill Moyers, Walter Jenkins, George Reedy & Co.—aides of Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson.

That's why names like Allen Marrinson, Calvin Fentress, Martin Hoffman, Scott Cohen, Thomas Houser, Mrs. Nadine Jacobsen, Mrs. Carol Khosrovi and others in the Percy camp are evoking interest—to the chagrin of Percy's staff, which labels such early scrutiny "ridiculous."

Percy, of course, insists he's not running for anything except re-election in 1972, and he repeats that disclaimer with regularity.

At a February staff meeting he warned his aides about presidential fever:

"Anyone here looking ahead to the White House had better leave now, because I am not a candidate."

Nobody left.

But that doesn't stop people from wondering how good the Percy people are and what their potential may be.

One answer is that despite striking youth—the key people are 33, 29, 35 and 42—and little big-time experience, they have performed somewhere between adequately and exceptionally.

SEVERAL OF the ideas for which Percy is best known—his home-ownership plan and his all-Asian peace conference proposal—were staff suggestions that Percy was [illegible] to find worthy, to mold and then push.

The real answer, however, is that not even Percy and the staff itself know how good they are.

Most Senate staffs get shakedown runs, quietly conducted on the sidelines of senatorial obscurity where most freshmen are consigned.

Chief Engineer Behind Percy

But the Percy Express was on center stage the day Congress opened. And his crew has been learning its trade while roaring along at full throttle — a potentially unnerving experience.

The man in charge of Percy's office — other than Percy himself, who really runs everything—is Marrinson, 33, who gave up a high-paying vice president's job with a Chicago bank to become Percy's administrative assistant.

MARRINSON was recommended by Percy's close friend and sometime adviser, youthful Rep. Donald Rumsfeld (R-Ill.). Marrinson led Rumsfeld's re-election campaign in 1964 before moving up to be a district co-ordinator for Percy in 1966.

He brings to the job a businessman's sharp grasp of organization, a readiness to make decisions and prod staffers and a loan executive's ability to say "no" at the right time — both to Percy, and to the scads of people who want to get at him for various reasons.

He also has a quiet toughness that has suppressed the jockeying to get near the throne by Percy "old timers"—a problem that led another Percy campaign aide to reject the top job.

PERCY'S chief speech writer is quiet, angular Fentress, a former writer for Newsweek. Fentress is far more liberal than his North Shore roots would ordinarily dictate.

A Percy staffer since the unsuccessful 1964 campaign for governor, Fentress—whose friends accuse him of being a Democrat — is probably the staffer personally closest to Percy.

Fentress says he now writes like Percy speaks and vice versa, although observers give Fentress higher marks.

If the senator's early speeches have burned down no barns with their eloquence, they have displayed an increasingly sharp ear for a key phrase.

Percy's legislative aide is Hoffman, 35, who projects a deceptively simple air until he opens up with briefings on what a hunk of legislation is all about; what a committee is doing at the moment; how support might be garnered for a proposed law, and a variety of other expertise on which a freshman lawmaker is utterly dependent if he is not to be caught with his senatorial pants down.

HOFFMAN, a former lieutenant in the 101st Airborne Division — where he was an aide to Westmoreland—clerked for a federal appellate judge, served as a federal prosecutor [illegible] and worked

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